



# EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

02

**BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL  
HEATH HARROWER**

## INTRODUCTION

The study of history, enabled by professional instruction and civilian education, will increase Army special operations' regional expertise and enhance intellectual creativity to assist in addressing complex problems, driving the operations process and developing sound strategic options. Army special operations forces work in a complex and uncertain environment. It contains regular, irregular and paramilitary enemies of increasing capability and is characterized by rapid change amidst societal, political, religious and environmental turmoil.<sup>01</sup> Within this environment, Army special operations personnel are charged with developing a deep understanding of local conditions and cultures that enables them to perform a nuanced shaping of the operational environment, that is, to work with friendly indigenous or host-

nation elements for conflict avoidance or mitigation and to set conditions for a rapid introduction of other friendly forces.<sup>02</sup> Understanding the history within a particular environment is critical to these nuanced shaping operations and ARSOF can only arrive at this understanding through an intellectual maturity honed by the study of history.

## DOCTRINAL FRAMEWORK FOR REGIONAL EXPERTISE AND UNDERSTANDING

Three lines of effort guide the development and employment of Army special operations. They include generating a force with a purpose, sustained engagement and executing operations. Regionally focused expertise begins in force generation and is expected to result in a culturally aware force that provides senior leaders with enduring situational understanding. Ultimately, Army special operations personnel are expected to possess area and regional expertise that informs operational design and assists in de-

veloping strategic options across the range of military operations.<sup>03</sup>

The Army special operations doctrinal capabilities of special warfare and surgical strike both demand regional expertise and enduring situational awareness to best achieve the desired operational- or strategic-level outcome. Army special operations doctrine recognizes the importance of regionally informed, culturally astute and politically nuanced elements within both of these capabilities. Furthermore, special operations doctrine defines understanding the operational environment as a SOF imperative. Specifically, it states "Special operations forces achieve objectives by understanding the political, military, economic, social...variables within the specific operational environment, and develop plans to act within the realities of those operational environments."<sup>04</sup> Additionally, ARSOF expect to achieve effects of magnitude disproportionate to their small footprint. The ability to think historically assists in achieving these effects and is necessary for success at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war.

## HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Army special operations personnel that possess an ability to think in a historical context can distill history into lessons that assist in making decisions and planning for the future. Dates, names and locations serve well in Trivial Pursuit, but the ability to think in a historical context goes well beyond a simple compilation of facts. In his book *Balkan Ghosts*, Robert Kaplan provides an example of this ability when describing an elderly gentleman in Yugoslavia whom he characterized as “able to predict the future.” This gentleman paid no attention to daily headlines because the “present for him was merely a stage of the past moving quickly into the future” and instead he thought in purely historical terms.<sup>05</sup> The ability to distill and understand the past allowed him to predict correctly trends in governance to include economics, leadership and reforms.<sup>06</sup> While this is an extreme example and we should not expect an ability to predict the future, understanding past events and leveraging that understanding as experience certainly lends depth to regional expertise. Additionally, leaders who learn through others’ experience will possess knowledge that may allow them to conceptualize faster than the enemy can adapt, critically important when the consequence of failure and incompetence are so final. Somebody, somewhere, at some point in time experienced the same events Army special operations will face in the future. Man has waged war over thousands of years, providing plenty of experience to leverage outside of one’s own, and through concerted study Army special operations personnel can identify lessons applicable to the situations they will face.

The ability to distill the lessons of history to the degree that Army special operations personnel can “anticipate [these] changes in the operational en-

vironment and exploit fleeting opportunities” and use them to assist linking tactical success to strategic success, like any other task, requires proficiency acquired through education and instruction.<sup>07</sup> Through study, one can assess the relation of past actions to a particular set of current circumstances to assess their relevance to the current operating environment. Through practice, one can also ascertain how to apply these differences and similarities to the current operating environment. Historian John Lewis Gaddis compares achieving this proficiency to that of achieving proficiency within sports. Proficiency in sports requires knowledge of the rules and a practice of baseline skills that provides preparation for general circumstances. However, each game contains its own characteristics and room is needed for individual discretion and judgment to address the particular circumstances.<sup>08</sup>

Professor Rufus Fears provides an applicable example in his lecture “The Wisdom of History.” One of the fundamental lessons he presents is the notion that freedom is not a universal value. Some nations based foreign policy and waged war on the belief that all people desire freedom. This belief also resulted in the illusion that America’s unique evolution of freedom is transferable and desired by others. However, a study of history demonstrates that many civilizations chose otherwise. In fact, some civilizations, such as the ancient Egyptians, did not even possess a word for freedom. A deeper study of history demonstrates different types of freedom including individual freedom (examples include religion, thought, and speech), political freedom (such as the right to vote and the right to a fair trial), and national freedom (an entity free of foreign control, to include a nation or tribe). History demonstrates these three types of freedoms rarely co-exist and that national freedom proved a far more powerful motivator than indi-

vidual or political freedom. The Roman Empire, Hitler’s Germany, North Korea, China and Russia are five examples that demonstrate the motivation for national freedom outstripping the motivation for individual or political freedom.<sup>09</sup>

If using Professor Fears’ lesson as a generalization, an ARSOF element employed in a specific location and working within a particular population can then use discretion and judgment gained through study to apply that historical lesson to the particular circumstances they face. An understanding of the importance various regional entities place on these types of freedom will greatly increase regional expertise. Army special operations can draw similar lessons from religion and spirituality. A deep understanding of ancient systems of faith remains integral to the very cultures that ARSOF operate within every day. The historical aspects of religion motivate millions of people even within cultures normally thought as secularist, such as Russia. Overlay the same understanding of the historical context of other aspects such as science and technology and Army special operations personnel will truly possess the regional understanding needed to solve complex problems and offer sound strategic options.

## HISTORICAL THOUGHT AND THE OPERATIONS PROCESS

This understanding also allows commanders to better connect all elements of the environment to drive the operational process through a more comprehensive approach. Critical to understanding is establishing context, that is, the set of circumstances surrounding the event or situation.<sup>10</sup> History serves as the basis for this context and historical thought allows for a better visualization of a desired end state by enabling a broader understanding of the environment. This is especially important when

**SOME NATIONS BASED FOREIGN POLICY AND WAGED WAR ON THE BELIEF THAT ALL PEOPLE DESIRE FREEDOM ... HOWEVER, A STUDY OF HISTORY DEMONSTRATES THAT MANY CIVILIZATIONS CHOSE OTHERWISE.**



dealing with complex and unfamiliar problems that commanders and their staffs cannot readily frame within existing doctrine.<sup>11</sup> The risk presented within these complex problems increases when the solutions are based on an incomplete understanding of the environment. This incomplete understanding may compound the risk to force and mission already resident within ARSOF operations that typically rely on small elements conducting low visibility or clandestine operations in austere locations that are far removed from their higher headquarters and other friendly forces. Historical knowledge is an essential element that enables the operations process and “buys down” risk by providing a more complete understanding, thus enhancing the odds for success through a sound and thorough operations process that reduces the effects normally attributed to such elements as fate, unforeseen circumstances, luck, fog, and friction. Using history as a stand-in for experience, commanders and their staffs can objectively evaluate courses of action in light of their alternatives and thus offer sound solutions based on more than a contemporary (and incomplete) understanding of the operational environment.

## HISTORICAL THOUGHT AND STRATEGY


The ability to think in a historical context is also critical to strategic success because the clarity and predictability derived from a mastery of doctrine and the operations process does not automatically translate into strategic competence. Success at the tactical and operational level, however brilliant, may not translate into strategic success as evidenced by the German armies of the World Wars, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the United States in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, historical knowledge is a critical factor in developing, managing, and adapting sound strategic options.

Strategic thought and theory’s connection with general history makes many of the continuing issues of war relevant within the current operating

environment. The context leading to the development of the strategic theory becomes apparent through the study of history and thus we can gauge how applicable it is to the current environment. Though every age contains a unique combination of events and conditions, they do nothing to diminish the relevance of historical strategic theory. Sound strategic theory is not based on contemporary events of the time and, because the present always contains dimensions of the past, it provides enduring relevance.<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz recognized the importance of understanding history as it related to strategy, acknowledging that it stands-in for experience and thus advocated that a study of history served as preparation for the future.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Clausewitz advocated the study of history to test general theoretical concepts, and as a result he discovered common patterns of behavior in military operations and codified these into axioms and principles for instruction. A study of history allowed him to distill these patterns into universal truths that he felt did not change regardless of culture, political entities involved, and the era in that it occurred. Thucydides, who preceded Clausewitz by more than a thousand years, maintained similar beliefs. Thucydides maintained the lessons of history were eternal because human nature does not change. Factors such as advances in science and technology do not make us immune to the lessons of history because we employ them through the same human nature that existed thousands of years ago; human nature that Thucydides claimed is motivated chiefly by a desire for power.<sup>15</sup> Studying the history of strategic theory and testing that theory across various historical cases will greatly assist Army special operations personnel with their ability to conduct strategic analysis and offer sound strategic options commensurate with expectations of SOF employment.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The concerted study of history is essential to understanding the environment and will increase Army special operations’ regional expertise and enhance intel-

lectual creativity to assist in addressing complex problems, driving the operations process, and developing sound strategic options. Admittedly, studying the past is not a surefire method for predicting the future; however, it does greatly prepare us for the future by expanding experience and increasing wisdom, and thus bettering our judgment. History is the only database available to assist in the understanding needed to successfully deal with current and future problems. As Army special operations continue to assess changes to doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership and education, personnel and facilities, continued investment in people and ideas remain essential, more so than investment in platforms. Within this, resources dedicated to enabling historical thought will set the foundation for the enduring situational understanding expected of Army special operations personnel. 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lt. Col. Heath Harrower** holds a BS in Aeronautical Science from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, an MA in Military Operational Art and Science from the Air Command and Staff College, and an MA in Military History from Norwich University.

**NOTES** **01.** United States Special Operations Command, *Global SOF Network 2020*, 8; Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1, *The Army* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 7 November 2012), 1-1, 1-2. **02.** Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-05, *Special Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 31 August, 2012), 2-3. **03.** *Ibid.*, 4-5. **04.** *Ibid.*, 13. **05.** Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 74. **06.** Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, 74-75. **07.** ADP 3-05, *Special Operations*, 14. **08.** John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History, How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11. **09.** Rufus Fears, “Is Freedom a Universal Value?,” *The Wisdom of History* (The Teaching Company, Chantilly, VA, 2007), Compact Disc, Lecture 5. **10.** Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 17 May, 2012), 2. **11.** MG Gordon B. Davis, BG Thomas C. Graves, and COL Christopher Prigge, “The Strategic Planning Problem,” *Military Review* (November-December 2013): 10. **12.** Andrew R. Wilson, “Why Strategy Matters,” *Masters of War: History’s Greatest Strategic Thinkers* (The Great Courses, Chantilly VA, 2012), Compact Disc, Lecture 5. **13.** Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy, from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 8. **14.** Andrew R. Wilson, “Clausewitz’s On War,” *Masters of War: History’s Greatest Strategic Thinkers* (The Great Courses, Chantilly VA, 2012), Compact Disc, Lecture 10. **15.** Rufus Fears, “Is Freedom a Universal Value?,” Lecture 10. **16.** Andrew R. Wilson, “Why Strategy Matters,” Lecture 1. **17.** Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 11.